TWO COMMUNICATIONS

GOLDWYN vs. THURBER

Producer and Author dispute over "Walter Mitty"

In response to its review of The Secret Life of Walter Mitty *in the issue of Aug. 4,* LIFE *has received the following letters from Producer Samuel Goldwyn and Author James Thurber.*

Sirs:

I am delighted that you chose my production of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* as the "Movie of the Week" in your Aug. 4 issue and that you consider Mitty's dream life to be "highly entertaining" since this is a picture which is designed for entertainment. I was, however, somewhat startled at your statement that Jim Thurber "grows almost profane when he thinks of how his story has been corrupted." Either Mr. Thurber has been misquoted or has in the past year done as complete a switch as ever Walter Mitty did from real life to dream world.

As I need not tell you, the original story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," is a pure gem, which added great lustre to the little magazine in which it was first published. However, in order to convert such a gem into a feature length motion picture it is necessary first to elaborate it into a screenplay.

I must confess that in the preparation of the screenplay I departed quite completely from traditional Hollywood policy by constantly consulting the author of the story itself. Ken Englund, one of the co-authors of the screenplay, made a special trip to New York to get from Mr. Thurber his ideas as to how the screenplay should be handled. I, of course, was only too happy to get Mr. Thurber's ideas and to pay him for them. After they had finished, Mr. Thurber wrote me a long letter in which he detailed his delight at the way the story was handled. Let me quote:

"It was a great pleasure to work with a man as intelligent and skillful as Ken Englund and I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to do so. It isn't often that I meet a man whose ideas and whose sense of story so beautifully coincide with *my* own."

That hardly leads me to believe that Jim Thurber thinks that his story in being translated to the screen has been corrupted.

And when it appears from your review that Mitty's real life adventures are so exciting as to bring about a result in which "the delicate point of Thurber's story is lost," all I can say is that Jim Thurber said in that same letter:

"The melodrama still remains the spine of our structure, but I feel and so does Ken Englund, that it no longer sticks out, but that it has been ingeniously interlaced with the dreams and the private life of our hero."

At that time, at least, Jim Thurber knew that there was a lot to learn in translating a story to the screen, for he concluded that letter by saying:

"I feel that I have learned a great deal in a short time about some of the problems that face a motion picture producer and a motion picture writer. Let me thank you again for selecting Ken Englund to work with me on this story and let me say once more that I am enthusiastic about this picture."

This account would not be complete, however, if I were not to add that on March 15, 1946, just before we were to start shooting, we sent Mr. Thurber a copy of the shooting script, telling him "we would be delighted and grateful to have any suggestion or idea you may have on the script." On March 25th we received the following telegram, "WRITING AIR MAIL LETTER CONTAINING A FEW MINOR SUGGESTIONS BUT SO MAJOR OPERATION AS SCRIPT SEEMS IN EXCELLENT SHAPE. THURBER."

And finally, on April 10th, Mr. Thurber wrote us, "Don't think that I fail to realize how difficult it is going to be to follow Walter Mitty with something as good."

James Thurber is much too fine a man to be saddled with anything but his own words. That is why I have quoted so extensively from what he, himself, has actually said about the way we handled his story.

And now—like Mitty, The Undefeated—with a faint, fleeting smile playing about my lips, I face the firing squad of your reporters and researchers; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, inscrutable to the last.

SAMUEL GOLDWYN

Hollywood, Calif.

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Sirs:

I wonder why Samuel Goldwyn, Inc., erect, motionless, jaw thrust out, guard down, assumes it is the reporters and researchers of LIFE who have him backed against the wall. The challenge is for me, and I gleefully accept it, in spite of my opponent's choice of that obsolete weapon of controversy, the excerpt-lifter.

On or about Nov. 25, 1943, Mr. Goldwyn brought to New York a completed 160-page script of "Mitty" by Everett Freeman and Ken Englund. Creative work had begun Jan. 2, 1943, and in the ensuing ten months several story treatments and a screen play were rejected by Mr. Goldwyn. Mr. Freeman alone for a few weeks, then with Miss Carmi Ormonde for a week or so, and from then on with Mr. Englund, developed the story line. During this vital period my counsel, criticism, and collaboration were never once sought.

I was confronted by a set story line appallingly melodramatic for poor Walter. An absolutely new and different story line was called for, but the shooting schedule, the budget, and the few days allotted to me would not permit of this. The miracle expectancy of Mr. Goldwyn is as famous as his inability to comprehend the problems of writing. He told me the first sixty pages were all right and asked

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...take 5"
Here's Elmer Nation on vacation
With his pipe and Revelation.
Man, it's great to be alive
When you sit back, relax, take five.
...take Revelation!
Ahhh! Those mellow, slow-burning tobaccos so skillfully blended with fragrant free-burning leaf. Yes, popularly-priced Revelation smokes so cool, so smooth, so steady, more and more pipe smokers "take 5" every day—just for the pleasure of it!
Take 5! Take Burley for body, Carolina for color, Virginia for vigor, Latakia for lusciousness and Perique for piquancy.
"take 5" glorious tobaccos in one great BLEND
REVELATION
SMOKING MIXTURE
THE PERFECT PIPE TOBACCO
"It's Mild and Mellow"
Made by the special PHILIP MORRIS process!

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